

POSTOPINION

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The NY Firefighters' Battle, Then and Now

TEN years after the 9/11 attacks on our nation, there is much to remember and recognize, but most especially there is America's great resiliency

On that horrific day, New York City firefighters, on and off duty, responded to the World Trade Center in record numbers. Images of heroic actions amid the unfolding disaster are seared into the minds of all Americans.

A nation watching the two burning towers also witnessed the largest rescue operation ever on US soil. Some 25,000 were saved — before the towers' fall killed 2,759. People of all races, colors and creeds were killed, including 343 heroic firefighters.

With the brutal and cowardly assaults on the Pentagon and Flight 93, the attacks resulted in the death of 2,928 innocents.

The rescue operations that began on 9/11 lasted two weeks, bringing hope to the families whose loved ones were missing and inspiring a nation that watched firefighters and other first responders risk their lives in the search for survivors.

Though no survivors were found after Day One, the herculean effort demonstrated a total commitment to saving lives.

The transition to a recovery operation was grueling — but with each victim recovered, first responders brought solace to grieving families.

A huge part of this effort was also the cleanup of the World Trade Center site, which engineering experts had predicted would take two years. Firefighters and other first responders worked in unison with ironworkers, carpenters and other tradesmen. Along with the construction companies, they worked 24/7, finishing the job in less than nine months and saving the city and nation billions of dollars.

What was achieved was truly remarkable. This unique coalition came together with the objective of providing closure for families, cleaning up the site and getting the country moving forward.

Americans responded to the attacks with an unimaginable outpouring of love and support, which buoyed the efforts of those working on the 22-acre site. Everyone working on The Pile felt this incredible support, inspiring all of us in those dark days.

The 9/11 attacks created the exact opposite of what terrorists had hoped for. Instead of cowering, America was galvanized by a patriotism and unity unseen since Pearl Harbor. Millions rushed to join our military and defend our country.

While fires still burned at the World Trade Center, the first graduates of many new firefighter classes were appointed, with all the new members vowing to risk their lives to protect New Yorkers. They accepted that the FDNY faces the added risk that comes with protecting the No. 1 terrorist target in America.

Those who perished on 9/11 were, unfortunately, not the only victims. In the de-

cade since, the attacks have continued to inflict a toll on the firefighters who survived that day but toiled for months on end at the site. Firefighters lost an average of 12 years' lung capacity; cancers are up 32 percent, despite initial predictions by experts that many of these diseases wouldn't begin to appear for 10 to 15 years.

Firefighters' response to the terrorist attacks lifted the spirits of the entire country, but their heroic efforts continue to have negative health consequences — realities that 9/11 firefighters are still confronting a decade later.

As we prepare to honor the thousands of innocent victims who lost their lives to the bloodthirsty terrorists, I believe this historic anniversary has one overarching theme we must all embrace: *Never forget.*

We must never forget the sacrifices of the heroes of 9/11, and we must never forget the thousands of innocents who died that day.

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